DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 105 PS 024 896

AUTHOR Shokraii, Nina H.
TITLE The Self-Esteem Fraud: Why Feel-Good Education Does Not Lead to Academic Success. CEO Policy Brief.
INSTITUTION Center for Equal Opportunity, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Nov 96
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Academic Failure; Blacks; *Compensatory Education; *Educational Theories; Elementary Secondary Education; High Risk Students; School Effectiveness; *Self Esteem; *Student Needs; Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Which comes first: achievement or self-esteem? This question is at the heart of an important educational controversy. Traditionally, public schools thought that students' satisfaction followed on the heels of academic success. In other words, children who performed well in class consequently felt good about themselves. But more recent educational theories have reversed this logic. They say that students must secure high self-esteem before they can hope to achieve. For all of its current popularity, however, self-esteem theory threatens to deny children the tools they need to experience true success in school and as adults. Much research provides empirical proof that achievement precedes self-esteem, and that there is almost no link between low self-esteem and any number of social pathologies, including poor school performance, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy. Black children are common targets of self-esteem theory, but they are also some of the most vulnerable, because many of them desperately require the same basic academic skills that self-esteem theory subordinates to a "feel-good" classroom experience. Schools must abandon the pursuit of empty self-esteem and return to traditional academic preparation. (Contains 34 references.) (Author/EV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 402 105

CEO POLICY BRIEF

November 1996

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

The Self-Esteem Fraud

Why Feel-Good Education Does Not Lead to Academic Success

By Nina H. Shokraii

Executive Summary

Which comes first, achievement or self-esteem? This question is at the heart of an important educational controversy. Traditionally, public schools thought that students' satisfaction followed on the heels of academic success. In other words, children who performed well in class consequently felt good about themselves. But more recent educational theories have reversed this logic. They say that students must secure high self-esteem before they can hope to achieve. In other words, they must feel good about themselves before they can perform well in class.

For all of its current popularity, however, self-esteem theory threatens to deny children the tools they will need in order to experience true success in school and as adults. Compelling research from around the world lends empirical proof to the traditional claim that achievement precedes self-esteem. There is, in fact, almost no link between low self-esteem and any number of social pathologies, including poor school performance, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy.

Black children are common targets of self-esteem theory, which in their case often goes by the name of Afrocentrism. Yet they are also some of the most vulnerable, because many of them desperately require the same basic academic skills that self-esteem theory subordinates to a shallow, feel-good classroom experience. One study even shows that inflated self-esteem among adolescent black males can encourage violent behavior.

Schools must abandon their mindless pursuit of empty self-esteem and return to the fundamental task of helping students do their best. Traditional academic preparation best teaches children how to achieve old-fashioned academic success.

PS 024896

NINA H. SHOKRAII IS DIRECTOR OF OUTREACH PROGRAMS AT THE INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE, A NONPROFIT PUBLIC INTEREST LAW FIRM IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jorge Amselle

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CENTER FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITY
815 FIFTEENTH STREET, NW, SUITE 928, WASHINGTON, DC 20001
PHONE: 202 639-0803 FAX: 202 639-0827
http://www.ceousa.org

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Introduction

Americans have lost confidence in their public schools. A *Washington Post* survey recently asked people what worries them about the future. They were given dozens of choices, from sky-high crime rates to increasing drug usage to old-fashioned economic anxiety. Of all these problems, however, Americans considered the deterioration of public schools as the country's most pressing problem. "The American educational system will get worse instead of better" feared 62 percent of them.[1]

This is not exactly a new concern. Frustrated by everything from a long-term decline in test scores to the recent rise in juvenile violence, many Americans are left scratching their heads in bewilderment. What has gone wrong? What can reverse these trends? Desperate for anything that might boost the academic achievement of their charges, many schools have turned to self-esteem theory, which promises that teaching children to feel good about themselves will help them perform better as students. This pedagogical approach has begun to dislodge the more traditional emphasis on subjects like reading, writing, and arithmetic.[2]

This is fundamentally wrongheaded. There is little reason to believe self-esteem leads to academic achievement, or even that self-esteem is necessary for academic success. It is therefore crucial to delegitimize the education establishment's mindless glorification of self-esteem. As Richard Weissbourd has written, schools gripped by self-esteem theory "are, in essence, producing a generation of poorly educated adults who will lack the habits of hard work and perseverance that have historically been necessary to achieving true success."[3]

What Is Self-Esteem?

There is no shortage of ways to define self-esteem. Perhaps the simplest one is found in *Webster's Dictionary*, which says that self-esteem is "satisfaction with oneself."[4] The Basic Behavioral Science Task Force of the National Advisory Mental Health Council offers a fuller explanation: "Self-esteem begins to develop early in life and has been studied in children as young as seven years of age. As children learn to describe aspects of themselves, such as their physical attributes, abilities, and preferences, they also begin to evaluate them. Researchers conclude that, contrary to intuition, individuals have not one but several views of their selves, encompassing many domains of life, such as scholastic ability, physical appearance and romantic appeal, job competence, and adequacy as a provider."[5]

Psychologists generally split self-esteem into two types: earned self-esteem and global self-esteem. The concepts of each differ in critical ways:

- **Earned self-esteem.** This is the self-esteem that people earn through their own accomplishments—satisfaction from having scored well on an exam, for example. The psychologist Barbara

Lerner says that earned self-esteem "is based on success in meeting the tests of reality—measuring up to standards at home and in school."[6] Earned self-esteem possesses all of the positive character traits that ought to be encouraged and applauded, because it is ultimately based on work habits.

- **Global self-esteem.** This refers to a general sense of pride in oneself. It is not grounded in a particular skill or achievement. This means that an underachieving student can still bask in the warmth of global self-esteem, even if the door to earned self-esteem is shut. Although theorists contend that this feeling of self-worth will inspire academic success, the reality is different. At best, global self-esteem is meaningless. At worst, it is harmful. William Damon, an educational psychologist at Brown University, warns that heightened global self-esteem can lead children to have "an exaggerated, though empty and ultimately fragile sense of their own powers ... [or] a distrust of adult communications and self-doubt."[7]

The fundamental difference between earned self-esteem and global self-esteem rests on their relationships to academic achievement. The idea of earned self-esteem says that achievement comes first and that self-esteem follows. Global self-esteem theory—which is more popular in schools—says that self-esteem leads the way and achievement trails behind. Earned self-esteem, of course, needs no nurturing. It will develop almost naturally when children have accomplished something worthwhile. Global self-esteem, however, is artificial. It requires active intervention on the part of teachers, parents, and other authority figures. It is more than mere encouragement—something all children need. Instead, it involves tricking kids into thinking that anything and everything they do is praiseworthy.

Self-Esteem and Academic Success

In 1986, a group of California state legislators convinced themselves that low self-esteem was the root cause behind a variety of social and economic problems such as drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and poor school performance. Before taking this line of thinking too far, however, they decided they needed some research to back up their claims. So they established the awkwardly-titled California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. The Task Force published its findings in a book called *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*. The editors might as well have called their book *The Social Unimportance of Self-Esteem*, however, because they found practically no connection between self-esteem and any of the behaviors they studied. As Neil Smelser noted in the introduction, "One of the disappointing aspects of every chapter in this volume ... is how low the associations between self-esteem and its

consequences are in research to date."[8] Over the years, other reviewers have offered similar readings of the available research, pointing out the results are unimpressive or characterized by "massive inconsistencies and contradictions."[9] Most remarkable about the California Task Force, it was not a disinterested group of scholars. They wanted to find a link. But when their research failed to turn one up, they had the honesty to admit it.

Student Performance in Asia

Scholars focusing on the connection between high global self-esteem and academic success have run into similar barriers.[10] When psychologists Harold W. Stevenson and James W. Stigler tested the academic skills of elementary school students in Japan, Taiwan, China, and the United States, the Asian students easily outperformed their American counterparts. That came as no surprise. But when the same students were asked how they felt about their subject skills, the Americans exhibited a significantly higher self-evaluation of their academic prowess than their foreign peers. In other words, they combined a lousy performance with a high sense of self-esteem. As Stevenson and Stigler point out, Asian schools teach their students to indulge in self-congratulation only after they have paid their dues, through years of learning and hard work. While educators in most countries frown upon pride —one manifestation of a high self-esteem—American teachers actually encourage it as a positive personality trait.[11]

Part of the problem, Stevenson and Stigler found, lies in American teachers' priorities in the classroom. They focus much more on sensitivity to the students' egos, whereas Asians concentrate on their ability to explain things clearly. Indeed, roughly half of the Asian teachers surveyed said that clarity is one of the most important attributes required to be a good teacher. Only 10 percent of them said that sensitivity is equally important. Given the same set of choices, American teachers reversed priorities. Moreover, American teachers avoid exposing their students' poor performance, fearing damage to their self-esteem. Japanese and Chinese teachers, on the other hand, regard mistakes as an index of what remains to be learned through persistence and increased effort. In other words, American schools worry more about how students view themselves than about their actual academic performance.

Australian researchers B.C. Hansford and J.A. Hattie scoured academic literature on the link between global self-esteem and academic achievement. And although they found a slim correlation, they also discovered that the better the research, the lower and less significant the connection. They recommended replacing efforts to boost global self-esteem with efforts to boost academic or subject-specific self-esteem—which can only occur if students achieve academic success.[12]

Other studies show that programs created to promote self-esteem among elementary school students actually produce less of it than those designed to improve academic performance. The best research in this area evaluated a federal Head Start program to help children in grades 1-3, called Project Follow-Through. The researchers charged different schools to implement the project. To judge the effectiveness of self-esteem in underwriting academic success, they selected schools with differing philosophies of education. The models were then categorized into three major types: (1) holistically-oriented classrooms prone to promote self-esteem, (2) behaviorally-oriented models emphasizing traditional basic instruction, and (3) combination models that joined the two previous models. Researchers looked at 9,000 students on a variety of measures, from basic skills to cognitive and affective skills. The results were astounding. Students taught using the behavioral model received the highest scores not only in academics but also on self-esteem. The researchers could therefore safely conclude that programs designed to provide young children with the tools for academic success tend to be more successful as the children improve in both academic performance and self-esteem.[13]

This rule is not limited to young children. Thomas Moeller, a psychology professor at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia, examined students in grades 6 and higher. In every instance, he concluded, "academic achievement is more closely related to academic self-concept than to global self-concept."[14]

Other research found that although academic achievement in one grade level predicts academic self-esteem in the next grade, neither academic achievement nor academic self-esteem have any identifiable effect on global self-esteem.[15] Still other research finds that grades in a given discipline affect academic self-esteem in that particular discipline only. General academic self-concept finds its roots in a school's climate, teachers' ratings, and students' commitment to work.[16]

Adolescents' academic performance seems not even to be a factor affecting global self-esteem. Instead, they respond to social activities.[17] Beyond high school, high school performance, academic ability, and socioeconomic status affect educational attainment more than global self-esteem.[18]

Self-Esteem and Black Children

Because self-esteem theory advertises itself as a quick fix to poor academic achievement, it would make sense that the neediest students are also the most vulnerable to its deceptive message. Indeed, black students enrolled in Afrocentric educational programs receive a full-course diet in self-esteem enhancement, all of it positioned on the shaky theoretical ground

that injecting racial pride into black children will help them overcome obstacles to academic success.[19] But again, the value of self-esteem for black children is highly questionable, even if it does not come packaged in Afrocentrism.

Self-esteem theory made its first dramatic impact upon American schools in 1954, when the Supreme Court accepted that school segregation damaged the self-esteem of African-American children in its *Brown* v. *Board of Education* ruling. Low self-esteem, the Court said, "affects the motivation of a child to learn, and has a tendency to retard children's educational and mental development." According to Barbara Lerner, this proposition makes three questionable assumptions about blacks: (1) Low self-esteem is the major cause of low academic achievement; (2) Blacks have a lower self-esteem than whites; and (3) Changing white attitudes toward blacks will raise black self-esteem. Taken together, these notions provide the reasoning behind the current repudiation of high standards and expectations in our public schools.[20]

In reality, research reveals that black children at the same grade level and in the same school system as white children display a higher sense of self-esteem. African Americans usually report "slightly higher levels of agreement with statements about taking a positive attitude toward oneself, judging oneself to be a person 'of worth,' and being generally satisfied with oneself."[21]

Studies also show that, like whites, enhancement of global self-concept is not a potent intervention for academic improvement for African-American adolescents.[22] Stanley Rothman and his colleagues at Smith College's Center for the Study of Social and Political Change found that while the self-esteem levels of blacks are now at least as high as those of whites, the average academic attainment among African-American students is still below that of whites. They conclude that the evidence "appears to show quite conclusively that . e low self-esteem hypothesis is neither a necessary nor sufficient explanation of African-American achievement levels."[23]

Crime, Violence, & Self-Esteem

Those who think low self-esteem is the cause of high crime rates among blacks are also wrong. According to a recent study by psychologists Roy Baumeister, Joseph Boden, and Laura Smart, "first, [this notion] does not fit the transient shifts in the crime rate among African Americans, which is now reaching its highest levels as slavery recedes farther and farther into the background. Second, self-esteem levels among African Americans are now equal to, or higher than, the self-esteem levels of whites. Third, it is far from certain that slaves had a low self-esteem."[24] A study by Jennifer Crocker and Brenda Major of the State University of New York at Buffalo, similarly

refuted the psychological theories that claim members of stigmatized groups (blacks, for example) should possess low global self-esteem. They argued that stigmatized individuals are not simply "passive victims but are frequently able to actively protect their self-esteem from prejudice and discrimination."[25]

Ironically, adolescent African-American males living in impoverished neighborhoods are more likely to turn violent if schools bombard them with unearned praise. Baumeister, Boden, and Smart found that when high self-esteem is challenged by others' negative views, egotism is threatened. People will react in one of two ways. They either lower their self-appraisal and withdraw, or they maintain their self-appraisal and manifest negative emotions toward the source of the ego threat. This response can easily become violent in individuals who place high emphasis on their self-appraisal.[26]

Vulnerable Children

Every day in the name of self-esteem, however, schools cheat low-income children (many of whom are black) into settling for inflated egos instead of increased knowledge. Such efforts aimed at guaranteeing minorities heightened self-esteem, coupled with lawsuits challenging minimum competency exams and proficiency tests, erroneously assume that these children's self-esteem cannot possibly get proper nourishment in the poor households in which they are reared. Social workers and teachers create special courses and excuses for these children on a regular basis.[27]

In his book *The Vulnerable Child*, Weissbourd vehemently attacks such efforts, asserting that "although poor children are more likely to suffer an array of ... problems, the great majority of poor children are prepared to learn, at least when they begin school. Developmental delays and serious learning difficulties among children ages three to five, are higher among poor than among middle- and upper-income children ... But over 75 percent of poor children ages 6-11 have never experienced significant developmental delays, or emotional troubles, or a learning disability in childhood." Weissbourd highly discourages enrolling disadvantaged minority kids in remedial courses or special education classes, because it makes it more difficult for them to move into the mainstream.[28]

From lower standards to a reduced emphasis on tests, minorities are constantly told that their egos are somehow more fragile and thus are somehow different from the rest of America, even though they have the most to gain from traditional ways of teaching.[29] In fact, blacks can flourish in this type of environment, as the experiences of schools such as Booker T. Washington (Atlanta), Xavier Prep (New Orleans), P.S. 91 (Brooklyn), and Dunbar (Washington) have shown.[30] African Americans excel in these

schools because they are expected to strive high and achieve. Instead of offering a broad array of extracurricular classes or dumbing down their curriculum to increase their pupils' "self-esteem," the schools offer a strict diet of math and reading and expect students to get the job done. As Sister Helen Struder, principal of the mostly-black Holy Angels school in Chicago, says, "After all, it's by success that you build self esteem."[31]

Conclusion

After years of failed experimentation, it is time to stop touting the importance of self-esteem and start providing students with the elements real self-esteem is made of. As this Policy Brief shows, building self-esteem is not only a smokescreen vis-à-vis academic success, it can also lead to considerable harm. After all, as Weissbourd points out "to develop effective coping strategies, children, in fact, need to learn to manage a certain amount of disappointment and conflict."[32]

As schools turn against self-esteem theory, they must go back to the basics of teaching, reinstalling high standards and expectations, and holding children accountable for their actions. But these efforts ought not replace paying attention to children's needs and concerns as individuals. Many educators agree on three general strategies:

- Build the relationship between a teacher or parent and a child on respect for the child's inborn strengths,
- Help the child set goals and then link sustained effort with success, and
- Examine the values you are promoting, because self-esteem is grounded on what a person values.[33]

The final and probably most important remedy is reintroducing parents in the education of their children. Experts unanimously agree that parental involvement in a child's education remains one of the most important factors in determining a child's academic success. Furthermore, parents supersede teachers at building earned self-esteem in their children through the special caring and positive/negative reinforcement that can only come with individualized interaction at home.[34]

■ ■ ■

NOTES

1. Mario A. Brossard and Richard Morin, "American Voters Focus on Worries Close to Home," *Washington Post*, September 15, 1996, pg. A1.

2. See, e.g., Chester E. Finn, "Narcissus Goes to School," *Commentary*, June 1990; Charles J. Sykes, *Dumbing Down Our Kids, Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can't Read, Write, or Add*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995; Joseph Adelson, "Down with Self-Esteem," *Commentary*, February 1996.

3. Richard Weissbourd, *The Vulnerable Child: What Really Hurts America's Children and What We Can Do About Them*, New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995.

4. A. Soukhanov, Ed., *Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary*, Boston: The Riverside Publishing Company/Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984.

5. "Basic Behavioral Science Research for Mental Health: Vulnerability and Resilience," *American Psychologist*, January 1996, Vol. 51, No. 1.

6. Barbara Lerner, "Self-Esteem and Excellence: The Choice and the Paradox," *American Educator*, Winter 1985.

7. William Damon, *Greater Expectations, Overcoming the Culture of Indulgence in America's Homes and Schools*, New York: The Free Press, 1995.

8. Andrew Mecca et. al., eds. *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, pg. 15.

9. See, e.g., M. Jackson, *Self-Esteem and Meaning*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984.

10. See, e.g., B.C. Hansford and J.A. Hattie, "The Relationship Between Self and Achievement/Performance Measures," *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 52, 1982; Einar M. Skaalvik and Knut A. Hagvet, "Academic Achievement and Self-Concept," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 58, 1990; Herbert W. Marsh, "Causal Ordering of Academic Self-Concept and Academic Achievement," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 82, 1990.

11. Harold Stevenson and James Stigler, *The Learning Gap*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.

12. Hansford and Hattie.

13. Paul Weisberg, "Education and Enrichment Approaches," *Handbook of Clinical Child Psychology*, C.E. Walker and M.C. Roberts, Eds., New York: John Wiley, 1983.

14. Thomas Moeller, "Self-Esteem: How Important Is It to Improving Academic Performance?" *Virginia Journal of Education*, November 1993.

15. See, e.g., E.M. Skaalvik and K.A. Hagtvet, "Academic Achievement and Self-Concept: An Analysis of Causal Predominance in a Developmental Perspective," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 58, 1990.

NOTES continued

16. See, e.g., D.R. Hoge, E.K. Smith, & S.L. Hanson, "School Experiences Predicting Changes in Self-Esteem of Sixth- and Seventh-Grade Students," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 82, 1990.

17. See, e.g., Skaalvik.

18. See, e.g., J.G. Bachman and P.M. O'Malley, "Self-Concepts, Self-Esteem, and Educational Experiences: The Frog Pond Revisited," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 50, 1986.

19. For a fuller treatment of Afrocentrism in the schools, see John J. Miller, ed., *Alternatives to Afrocentrism*, 2nd edition, Washington, D.C.: Center for Equal Opportunity, 1996.

20. Barbara Lerner, "Intelligence and Law," *Intelligence*, R.L. Linn, Ed., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

21. Finn.

22. See, e.g., M. Mboya, "The Relative Importance of Global Self-Concept and Self-Concept of Academic Ability in Predicting Academic Achievement," *Adolescence*, Spring 1989, Vol. 24, No. 93; M. Mboya, "A Descriptive Study of Their Self-Concepts and Academic Achievements," *Adolescence*, Fall 1986, Vol. 21, No. 83.

23. Finn.

24. Roy F. Baumeister, Joseph M. Boden, and Laura Smart, "Relation of Threatened Egotism to Violence & Aggression: The Dark Side of High Self-Esteem," *Psychological Review*, 1996, Vol. 103, No. 1.

25. Jennifer Crocker and Brenda Major, "Social Stigma and Self-Esteem: The Self-Protective Properties of Stigma," *Psychological Review*, 1989, Vol. 96, No. 4.

26. Baumeister.

27. Weissbourd.

28. Weissbourd.

29. Weissbourd and Lerner.

30. Carl Horowitz, "History 101 For Black Schools: Past Successes Can Serve As A Guide For Reform," *Investor's Business Daily*, July 26, 1996.

31. Id. and Nina Shokraii, "Raising The Bar," *Policy Review*, March/April 1996.

32. Weissbourd.

33. Laura S. Stepp, "A Full Head of Esteem: Praising Kids and Putting Stars on Their Work Isn't Enough," *Washington Post*, February 21, 1995.

34. Weissbourd, Sykes and Damon.

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the Center for Equal Opporunity or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

CENTER FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

The Center for Equal Opportunity (CEO) is a project of the Equal Opportuinty Foundation, a non-profit research institution established under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. CEO sponsors conferences, supports research, and publishes policy briefs and monographs on issues related to race, ethnicity, immigration, and public policy.

Linda Chavez, President